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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 006647

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: IMPRESSIONS FROM THE SOUTH

REF: A. BANGKOK 6619

[B](#). BANGKOK 6554

[C](#). BANGKOK 6477

Classified By: DCM ALEXANDER A. ARVIZU. REASON 1.4 (D).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY/COMMENT: In an effort to gage the current situation in Thailand's south, Bangkok PolOfs recently completed an extended trip through Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala provinces, meeting with a cross-section of interlocutors including local Islamic groups, security officials, academics, journalists, and businessmen. The visit focused on three main themes: security; education; and local sentiments. On security, we heard a wide range of assessments of the situation in southern Thailand, from Thai security officials who claimed it was improving, to local businessmen who predicted worse to come. Education was a major theme in all our meetings. Many locals are upset over Royal Thai Government interference in Islamic "pondok" schools and the general lack of educational opportunities; the government remains concerned over the pondoks' role in the violence. Local Muslims uniformly expressed frustration and anger over perceived historical "injustices" that continue, in their minds, to be perpetrated by the police and military. Local anger continues to be directed at symbols of the Thai central government, especially the police. We did not detect strong or overt anti-U.S. sentiment. END SUMMARY/COMMENT.

[2](#). (C) Bangkok PolOfs traveled to Thailand's southernmost, Muslim majority provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala from September 7th - 9th. In Narathiwat province, PolOfs met with the leader of the Provincial Islamic Council, Abdul Rahman Samad; Deputy Provincial Police Commander Col. Krachang Suwannarat; and with local business leaders from the Narathiwat Industry Council. In Pattani, PolOfs met with Dr. Phirayot Rahimmula and Dr. Chidchanok Rahimmula from Prince of Songkhla University; local Army Commander Col. Yotchai Yangyuen; prominent journalist Paret Lohasan; and local businessman Anusat Suwanmongkon. In Yala PolOfs met with Dr. Ismail Lufti Japagiya, Rector of Yala Islamic College, and with leaders of the Young Muslim Association of Thailand.

APPEARANCES

[3](#). (C) Traveling through Thailand's southernmost, Muslim majority provinces is surprisingly easy. There is a deceptive calm for a region that is supposed to be under selective martial law. The atmosphere has the outward appearance of normality as people go about their business, and security forces maintain a lax approach. The roads are excellent, and the roadblocks set up by Thai security forces go mostly unmanned during the day. There are large numbers of people on the streets, and businesses are open. People in public reacted generally positively when our obviously foreign group passed by. Even at the Krue Se Mosque, the center of fighting during the attacks of April 28, locals seemed pleased to see a group of "tourists," complaining that the tourists who used to visit from Malaysia and Singapore no longer came.

SECURITY SITUATION

[4](#). (C) Despite almost daily incidents of violence directed against symbols of Thai authority, local Thai security officials presented generally optimistic assessments of the violence. Narathiwat's deputy Police Commander, Col. Krachang Suwannarat, characterized the ongoing violence as directly related to the activities of separatist groups. Col. Krachang said that local students who had studied abroad, specifically those who had studied in Indonesia, had been radicalized, and were returning to commit violence. However, Krachang felt that the situation in the south was improving. He said recent arrests of pondok teachers involved in recruiting students to commit violence had disrupted separatist activity. (Note: While insisting that the situation was improving, Krachang did admit that the technology and sophistication of the attackers was continuing to improve. During our conversation, Krachang casually

showed PolOffs a cell phone detonator that he said had been removed from a diffused bomb, noting that bomb technology had improved. End Note)

15. (C) Col. Yotchai Yangyuen, Commander of the Pattani Army Circle, also put a positive spin on this year's increase in violence, claiming that recent attacks were in the "normal pattern." Yotchai said army efforts to stop the violence are being hampered by inexperienced soldiers, and by the difficulty of getting information from locals unwilling to cooperate with uniformed security forces.

16. (C) The feelings of local business leaders over the security situation was mixed. Chinese-Thai Pattani businessman Anusat Suwanmongkon, owner of the CS Pattani hotel, gave an optimistic assessment of the security situation, blaming the sensationalist Bangkok media for exaggerating reports of violence in the south. Anusat highlighted his personal good relationships with his Muslim neighbors and employees. A much more grim outlook was provided by members of the Narathiwat Industrial Council. Also ethnically Chinese, they felt increasingly threatened by their Muslim-Malay neighbors. They noted that local Chinese-Thai businessmen were usually armed and probably would leave if the situation continued to deteriorate.

EDUCATION - THE CENTRAL ISSUE?

17. (C) Local Muslims remain extremely sensitive to outside interference with their traditional religious schools, but showed strong interest in broadening educational opportunities for their community. Dr. Lutfi Japagiya, the controversial Rector of the Yala Islamic College, said that he hoped his rapidly expanding Pattani campus would be able to offer greater opportunities for local Muslims. Japagiya readily admitted that his school received large donations from foreign sources, but said he was forced to accept international donations because of lack of funding from the Thai government. Sounding a conciliatory tone, Japagiya said his role as an educator was to provide educational opportunities for his students. To do that, Japagiya hopes to expand his college to 10,000 Muslim students, including 1,000 foreign students, and teach them subjects beyond Islam, including IT, economics, Chinese, and English. He said he wanted to teach his students who believe that non-Muslims are the enemy that this is not the case.

18. (C) Abdul Samad, in his capacity as Chairman of the Narathiwat Islamic Council, oversees pondok schools in the province. He claimed that local pondoks were not being used to distribute separatist literature or indoctrinate students. He said that local youths were instead being "brainwashed" by outsiders. Samad said the NIC held regular training programs for provincial religious teachers to prevent extremist teachings. Like Japagiya, Samad hopes that a planned Islamic university for southern Thailand -- which he is lobbying to have located in Narathiwat -- would help prepare his students for a "globalized" world, by teaching them English and Chinese, in addition to Islamic studies. Samad was very moderate in tone and went out of his way to praise the U.S. tradition of religious freedom. (Note: Samad invited PolOffs to view an ongoing training session for pondok teachers at the central Mosque. PolOffs visited the training session and observed 200 teachers, male and female, participating in a "brainstorming" activity on how to improve education in the pondoks. The group received PolOffs politely. End Note.)

"INJUSTICES" - WHAT DOES THE POPULATION REALLY WANT?

19. (C) The consensus among our interlocutors was that most southern Thai Muslims do not necessarily want a separate state, but rather an end to the historical injustices they attribute to government authorities. In some conversations, local Muslims blamed the Bangkok-based media for exaggerating the level of violence in southern Thailand, and asserting that many incidents were separatist related (Ref C), when in reality many are related to local business or personal conflicts. Many Muslims complained that heavy-handed police tactics were contributing to local resentment towards security forces.

10. (C) According to Professor Perayot Rahimmula of Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, the RTG exaggerates the threat of separatism. Most southerners only want security, three meals a day, and the opportunity to send their children to school, he asserted. Pirayot called the problem "a local issue," and denied a link to international terrorism. The professor commented that the youths who participated in the 28 April attacks against government targets had been manipulated into believing they were carrying out a religious jihad as expounded in the "Jihad in Pattani" booklets some carried. In general, he felt that police brutality and insensitivity towards Muslims, and not separatism, was the

key contributing factor for the worsening violence.

11. (C) Pattani based journalist Paret Lohasan, who works for large, Bangkok-based outlets, agreed that the local population is not really interested in separatism, but is vulnerable to manipulation by separatists who exploit grievances stemming from everyday poor treatment at the hands of security forces and civilian officials.

12. (C) PolOffs met with a several members of the Young Muslims Association (YMA) of Thailand in Yala. Comparing this year's unrest to the historical separatist movement, they noted that the significance of religion was a new element when compared to separatist movements of the past. They claimed the public was more supportive of previous movements that based claims of autonomy of historical and cultural grounds, rather than for religious reasons. Members also said that the youths behind the 28 April attacks had been misled by poor religious teachings, a belief that black magic would protect them, and a sense they were part of a jihad. The YMA members are angry over Thai security forces raids of mosques and pondok schools, and suspicious over U.S. intentions in the region. They asked PolOffs about rumors that circulate in the South that the USG is inciting the violence for its own ends, and politely listened to denials.

13. (C) COMMENT: In our assessment, the problem of Thailand's "south" is localized in the southernmost, Muslim majority provinces. The good infrastructure, clean streets, and large numbers of people going about their business might be deceptive given the many violent attacks that have occurred this year, but they do provide important context when measuring the scope of this problem. Southern Thailand is not burning.

14. (C) In our series of meetings we heard two common themes over and over from local Muslims: concerns about education; and a strong local feeling of "injustice." Our Muslim interlocutors tend to blame the government and "outsiders" for southern problems, without exhibiting much willingness to assume responsibility for promoting non-violent solutions to grievances, however legitimate.

15. (C) COMMENT: Embassy believes that expanded public diplomacy efforts, focused on education/skills training, would be welcomed by a large part of the population. Bilateral security assistance focused on expanding the coordination and analytical ability of Thai security forces should also remain a priority for the USG. However, uniformed Thai officials and other manifestations of the Thai central government presence are deeply resented by much of the southern population. Accordingly, U.S. assistance to Thai law enforcement and security officials in the south should be kept as low-key as possible. END COMMENT.
JOHNSON